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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0309
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2136
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BISHKEK 001417

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SUBJECT: AN IFTAR IN OSH: A TRIP TO SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN

BISHKEK 00001417 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On September 28-29, the Ambassador traveled to Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second city, and met with government officials, NGO and political party representatives, and journalists. The Ambassador toured the newly renovated Drug Control Agency regional headquarters, and she met with participants of a USAID-funded outreach program for at-risk youth. The Ambassador hosted an Iftar dinner for leading Islamic clerics, academics, and community representatives. People were concerned about the increased drug trafficking and use, and the criminality connected to it. There was a divergence of views regarding the current threat posed by religious extremism, but almost everyone agreed that economic development was the key to combating extremism and other regional problems. END SUMMARY.

DCA's New Regional Headquarters: Very Clean

12. (SBU) Col. Rassul Raimberdiev, head of the Southern Branch of the Drug Control Agency (DCA), led the Ambassador on a tour of the DCA's regional headquarters, which was recently renovated with U.S. assistance. The facility was impressive, with secure storage areas for evidence, weapons, and equipment; a lock-up for detainees; a new laboratory; a training hall; and new furniture and computers. The facility was also spotless, with hardly a paper on any desk. The apparent inactivity was explained by the fact that agents were out in the field.

13. (C) Raimberdiev said that the difficult terrain of Kyrgyz-Tajik border area compounded the problem of interdicting the increased flow of opium and heroin from Afghanistan. While he claimed there had been increased seizures of hard drugs, he said it was hard for his limited mobile patrols to track smugglers who came through the mountains on horseback or by foot. He said he needed horses, satellite phones, and more men to do the job. When asked why

the DCA had more staff in Bishkek if Osh appeared to be the bottleneck along the transit route, Raimberdiev replied that keeping staff in Bishkek was understandable, as the drugs would eventually pass through Bishkek anyway on their way to Kazakhstan and Russia. Raimberdiev also said that the drug "mafia" had corrupted a number of local police officers, but he remained confident of his DCA officers because they had passed polygraph examinations.

Youth Power Center: Reaching Out to At-Risk Youth

14. (SBU) The Ambassador visited the USAID-funded "Youth Power Center," a program that provides alternative activities, such as English classes, a computer club, and sports, for youth at risk for drug use. The Center also targets peer education and outreach efforts on HIV/AIDS to university students and other youth. During a roundtable discussion with program directors and activists, several speakers presented a depressing assessment of increasing hard drug use in Osh. They said that youth in Osh were well aware of the connections between intravenous drug use, sex, and HIV/AIDS, but still drug use was increasing. They attributed this, in part, to the easy and wide availability, with the price per dose having fallen to as little as USD 2. When asked what the police were doing to stop this, participants laughed and said that the local police were involved in the trade.

Iftar: Bridges to the Muslim Community

15. (U) The centerpiece of the trip was an Iftar dinner --the ceremonial breaking of the fast during the month of Ramadan -- that the Ambassador hosted for 30 leading representatives of the Muslim community, including the Kazy of Osh and other

BISHKEK 00001417 002.2 OF 004

clerics, the Governor and state officials, academics, and students. The Ambassador stressed that through various exchange, speaker, and outreach programs, we were working to build stronger connections between the Americans, American Muslims and the Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan. In his remarks, Osh Governor Jantoro Satybaldiyev noted that this Iftar dinner was important because it was the first major event of Ramadan this year in Osh, and because it showed that Americans were trying better to understand Islam. The Kazy of Osh, Suyun Kalykov, echoed the Governor's thoughts, noting that the exchange programs and exchange of views built better understanding.

Political/Civil Society Roundtable

16. (C) During a frank discussion with NGO and political party representatives, the Ambassador heard differing views expressed about the government's crackdown on perceived extremists, and she witnessed first-hand the inter-ethnic tensions that are part of life in Osh. Several speakers raised concerns about religious extremism in the south, complaining that "uneducated" Islamic missionaries were exploiting the low level of economic development in recruiting followers to their extreme views. While some in the group thought that the government should take more action -- restricting such missionary activities, as well as meeting its obligations in education and economic development -- others cautioned that the security services often mistook normal religious activity for extremism. (Note: Interestingly, the group referred only to the activities of Islamic missionaries and did not mention the activity of Christian missionaries. End note.) There was no consensus about where to draw the line between freedom of religion and "proper control" by the state. They also felt that there was an ethnic element to this tension, as many of the perceived religious extremists were ethnic Uzbeks. Expressing a strongly nationalistic Kyrgyz view, the representative of the Erkindik party called for greater state regulation over the

media, religious groups, and society to control these outside influences. Staring straight at an ethnic-Uzbek NGO leader, she said that the country needed only one language -- Kyrgyz.

The Ata Meken party representative suggested that Kyrgyzstan, after following the communist and then capitalist models, needed to find its own path for economic development.

Governor: Things under Control for Now

17. (C) Jantoro Satybaldiyev, Osh Oblast Governor and the President's Representative in the South, told the Ambassador that the local political situation was complicated by land and religious issues. There wasn't enough land to meet the needs of farmers, and the post-Soviet division of the Ferghana Valley among three countries blocked natural economic integration. Contrasting the religious situation in the Ferghana Valley to that in Bishkek, Satybaldiev said that fundamentalism -- expressed through groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir -- was a serious threat to stability. He thought that the situation was under control at present, but much would depend on continued economic development. This year's harvest had been very good for fruits, but the cotton crop had been poor. The Governor said greater investment and trade was needed, but he was wary of Chinese investment: while Chinese traders brought in goods at lower prices, an influx of Chinese workers had displaced some Kyrgyz labor. Satybaldiev also cited the growing drug trade as a threat, and he did not believe that the DCA or the Border Guards had sufficient resources to combat the narco-traffickers. Reducing the supply in Afghanistan, he added, would be the most important step forward.

SARA: Closer to the Action

BISHKEK 00001417 003.2 OF 004

18. (C) The Director of the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA), Jolbors Jorobekov, told the Ambassador that the recent move from Bishkek to Osh had put SARA closer to the center of religious activity in the country. While his agency was charged with administrative functions, such as the registration of religious organizations, he was also concerned that the (government-appointed) muftiate were losing the debate with extremist groups. While he personally felt that educated people could make up their own minds about religion, he worried that average people did not understand much about religion and often were manipulated by missionaries. Kyrgyzstan's law on religious organization was very liberal, but a proposed law on proselytizing would add some restrictions -- not as in Uzbekistan, but more like Russia's law.

From the Uzbek Community: A Calmer View

19. (C) The Ambassador also met with Khaliljan Khudayberdiev, the Director of Osh TV, an independent television station that broadcasts largely (though not exclusively) to the ethnic Uzbek community. Khudayberdiev said that after religion had been pressed down for 70 years under the Soviets, it was now experiencing a resurgence, but he dismissed reports that there was a problem with extremism. Different groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir had sprung up, but their roots were in other countries, and he did not feel that they had a wide following in the south. "Our general religion," he said, was more moderate than that of these groups, and people who understood religion were not radical. He blamed journalists "sitting in their offices in Bishkek" for reporting rumors without knowing the facts. Khudayberdiev also felt that President Bakiyev was taking a pragmatic approach to governing, and that he remained popular in the south.

Mayor: Ethnic Relations are Good

¶10. (C) Jumadyl Isakov, the Mayor of Osh, said that relations with Uzbekistan, and relations between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, were good. He thought that a proposed visa-free travel regime between the two countries would benefit trade and development, and he had worked to promote cultural exchanges with Andijon, just across the border. In Osh itself, there was no problem with ethnic relations, he said; the deputy mayor was an ethnic Uzbek, and there were ethnic Uzbek MPs. He recognized economic development as his major challenge, and he hoped to introduce certain tax breaks to attract local and foreign investors.

Meeting the Press: How is the U.S. Helping?

¶11. (U) The Ambassador also held an on-the-record roundtable discussion with over a dozen journalists. Among other questions, the journalists asked about the effectiveness of Kyrgyzstan's efforts against terrorism and narco-traffickers. The Ambassador explained that the U.S. had provided over \$6.5 million in support to the DCA and had also provided considerable material support to the Border Guards and the Ministry of Defense, including four An-2 planes the previous week, to bolster these efforts. While we were pleased that drugs seizures were up, still more needed to be done to roll up the trafficking networks.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) We consider that the Iftar dinner was a major success, as several guests, some of whom had been to the U.S.

BISHKEK 00001417 004.2 OF 004

on exchange programs, commented that they appreciated the outreach efforts and valued the connections to the U.S. On the situation in the south, people generally agreed that economic development, religious extremism, and drug trafficking were the major issues confronting the south. There was a divergence, however, on how much of a threat was presented by extremists and extremist groups. Some felt there needed to be stronger state action, while others cautioned that too strong a crackdown could be counterproductive. Indeed, the OSCE rep in Osh, while acknowledging the current security concerns, commented that the security crackdown had led to clearly unfair trials for perceived extremists. If there was one message that emerged from the trip, it was that continued economic development would be key to addressing the region's range of problems.
END COMMENT.
YOVANOVITCH